

LEARNING ABOUT CHRISTMAS THROUGH PLAY

Twinkling lights, shiny tinsel, presents to wonder what's inside, and Christmas trees with beautiful decorations, are all part of the wonder of Christmas for little children. For many years I presented Christmas play workshops to playgroups. The following are some of the activities that worked best:

DOLL PLAY

The central theme of Christmas is a baby. Set up a doll corner early in last term and keep it there for the whole term. Collect:

- Several washable baby dolls, preferably representing the cultures of your playgroup
- 0000 sized baby clothes. Opportunity shops often have a great selection
- Bowls to bath the dolls. Kitty litter trays are stable and a great size
- Hand towels, sponges or face washers; soap or a few drops of detergent
- Bunny rugs and baby blankets
- Moses baskets, doll capsules, cradles either professional or home made from cardboard boxes
- Strollers or prams

Start with the dolls, beds and strollers, then after several weeks begin to introduce blankets, rugs and dolls' clothes.

About mid-term try several weeks of bathing the dolls. You may like to do this outdoors and let the children wash the dolls' clothes at the same time. String up a clothesline to complete the experience. Use only about 1cm of water in the bottom of the tray, and only allow one child for each tray to keep the mess minimal.

When you start to read the Christmas story get some hay from the pet shop and make a simple manger. Swaddle a doll in a bunny rug and place it in the manger.

NATIVITY SCENE

Years ago I purchased a wooden nativity scene. Many children have enjoyed it. I added to it some extra wooden animals; mainly ones that I picked up in op shops. It's fun to make children ponder by asking them if they think there was a hippopotamus in the Christmas story.

There are so many things about Christmas that children can't touch, so I try to take these things and make them safe for children to handle.

STARS

Another important feature of the Christmas story that the children easily relate to is the star that led the wise men to Jesus.

Put out only star cutters with the play dough

Make a simple biscuit dough and make star biscuits at snack time

Make star-shaped fairy bread by cutting star shapes out of fresh bread, lightly butter and dip in hundreds and thousands; serve for snack time

Sing songs like *Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star* or substitute stars for spots in the song: *Put a Spot over Here and a Spot over There*

Draw stars over the children's painting paper with a white candle or white crayon. Use a very watery paint and the children will 'discover' the stars as they paint.

Buy some packets of star stickers. Put them on children's fingers while singing star songs, or use them to make Christmas cards or gift tags

Use star shapes to make a collage: either paste stars onto normal paper, or paste other cut-outs onto star-shaped paper.

Make wrapping paper using cut potato star prints or commercial star stamps. Stamp onto tissue or other large pieces of paper

Remember the more imperfect children's crafts look to you the more authentic it looks to the person who receives it.

DRESS UPS

Tea towels; headbands for shepherds

CRAFTS

Keep all crafts simple. If you need a model and adults to help it is too difficult. Put out the materials and let the children create.

Christmas cards

On an appropriate sized piece of folded coloured cardboard, let children paste, use stickers, print, stencil or draw their Christmas creations. Alternatively cut the cards into star, candle or Christmas tree shapes for children to decorate. Recycle last years Christmas cards and wrapping (if you saved it) by cutting out pictures or motifs for children to chose and paste.

Wrapping paper

Stenciling or stamping onto brown paper makes lovely Christmas wrapping paper. Tissue paper is a little harder for children to work with but is effective as long as the paint is not too watery.

Gifts

Popular gifts for Christmas that children can make are:

- Photo frames with collage edges

- A collage, handprints or painting framed by gluing it onto a large piece of coloured cardboard.

- Tree decorations

COOKING

A birthday cake for Jesus

CHRISTMAS TREE & PRESENT WRAPPING

Collect a Christmas tree about the height of the tallest child

Put together a box of safe unbreakable decorations that the children are free to put on and take off the tree. Include:

- Pieces of ribbon, bows, lengths of tinsel, streamers

- Make or buy stars, bells, balls, paper chains, and candles

- Have some pipe cleaners available to fix the decorations to the tree.

BOOKS AND STORY TELLING

There are many wonderful books available that tell the Christmas story to little children. These include interactive books such as feely books, pop up books, and books that have lift up sections on each page.

My own collection includes a giant book and a very small book of the Christmas story.

For story telling I find it effective if I dress up as Mary and tell the story from her perspective. This holds the children's interest well.

MUSIC

Songs - there are many traditional and contemporary Christmas songs that are appropriate for little children. If you are not musical ask the music department of your church to tape a few songs at one of their music practices.

Instruments

Bells for songs like:

*Ring, ring those bells, light the Christmas tree
Jesus is alive born, for you and me
Ring, ring those bells everybody say
Jesus we remember this your birthday*

Drums for *The Little Drummer Boy*

Tambourines (commercial or made by the children)

Note: Don't encourage any instruments that are blown such as a trumpet. Communicable diseases that are spread by droplets will quickly pass from child to child when instruments are blown.

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